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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [OIIP](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: SECRETARY'S SPEECH ON INTERNET FREEDOMS PROVOKES LIVELY
DEBATE IN TUNISIA

Ref: STATE 4203

Sensitive but Unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Secretary Clinton's January 22 speech on Internet freedom was well-regarded by Tunisian contacts, though it did not receive any coverage in the official press, given government oversight and censorship of Tunisian media. Discussions following Embassy-sponsored speech viewing parties and informal conversations following the speech revealed that Tunisians are frustrated with what they see as heavy government and social influence over the Internet and press, though some saw the wisdom of some sort of Internet watchdog to prevent the spread of misinformation or personal attacks. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Embassy Tunis hosted six bloggers at a viewing party on a large screen in the Embassy multipurpose room. Despite occasional connection problems, the live speech and ensuing follow-up questions were well-received by the group. A lively impromptu discussion in French and Arabic about internet freedoms and challenges followed the viewing. Internet freedom became a metaphor for freedom of expression for the group. Though the bloggers ranged in age, educational background, gender, and their blogs span topics as diverse as analysis of Tunisian politics, personal anecdotes, and intellectual criticism, all the bloggers agreed that the Tunisian blogosphere has a problem with censorship, whether coming from the government or - more perniciously - self-censorship. One blogger noted that while she could easily change the name and location of her blog following all-too-common government shutdowns of her site, it is much harder for her to continue to post honestly after being accused by visitors to her site of being a "kafir" or infidel due to her liberal ideas about Islam and the veil. The group conceded that the worst ambushes generally came from fellow Tunisians online, not government interventions. However, the group agreed that the Tunisian blogosphere was legally fragile, and at risk of government control through subversion by online youth groups from the ruling party, the RCD.

¶3. (SBU) A common conversation theme was that the web represents democracy, as each individual can have an equal voice online, and that this is especially important in the Arab World, where governments often repress free speech of individuals and dissident groups. Colorfully, one blogger delighted in the fact that "Anyone can have a blog, whether you are a minister or a streetwalker." Writing online, a woman said, was akin to being a true citizen because it represented civic participation at its most essential. One man likened the Tunisian blogosphere to a "vital bubble of oxygen in an air-deprived country". They lauded the existence of over 500 active blogs in Tunisia and that fact that over ten percent of the country has a Facebook account as proof that freedom of expression in Tunisia is not dead.

¶4. (SBU) Interestingly, while all of the bloggers followed each other's work online, this event was the first time many of them had met in person. The group came to the consensus that while Tunisia surpassed Morocco in quality-of-life for most citizens, it suffered

by comparison to what they saw as Morocco's vastly more open space for criticism and debate, whether in the written press or in the blogosphere. One blogger commented that whereas Tunisians wait anxiously to see when the president will die and who will replace him, Moroccans know that their king will always be king and thus they feel safe in pushing the boundaries of free speech and debate, and are allowed to protest and organize legally. He cited the existence of actual opposition newspapers as proof of the existence of liberty in Morocco.

¶5. (SBU) The group noted that Facebook was not as useful an organizing tool for activists as they had originally hoped. They said that "groups" that form on Facebook do not generally lead to action in Tunisia, as they have in Egypt in the form of protests and demonstrations, as there are strict rules against the formation of groups and societies by the Tunisian government. The bloggers agreed that the creation of a pan-Mediterranean union of bloggers, ranging across North Africa and perhaps based out of Marseille, would strengthen the ability of Tunisian bloggers to bring their intellectual debates to a broader audience, and make their work safer from government censorship.

¶6. (SBU) Embassy Tunis also hosted a second successful viewing party of the Secretary's Internet freedoms speech at the American Corner at AMIDEAST in downtown Tunis. Over 20 students between the ages of 18 and 25 attended the speech and following conversation. Following the speech, an Embassy officer engaged the group in a discussion of their thoughts and reactions to the Secretary's speech. Several were intrigued by the social entrepreneurial aspect of information technology and impressed by what others had been able to accomplish through Facebook and mobile phones.

¶7. (SBU) Audience members took particular note at Tunisia being referenced in the speech as having "stepped up [its] censorship of the Internet" in the past year, and acknowledged that there is still a long way to go in their country before they will be able to enjoy unrestricted access to the Internet and full freedom of expression. However, the majority of the group did not see censorship as necessarily a bad practice. First, they mentioned that censorship does not pose many problems for them since they are all tech-savvy and know how to use proxy servers to access YouTube and the like. Furthermore, a large number voiced their opinion that some governing body should be allowed to censor what material is available to the public on the basis that some information is deleterious to society and its citizens.

¶8. (SBU) During a dinner for visiting DAS Wittes, hosted by the Ambassador on the evening of January 21, Tunisian civil society and business contacts voiced lively opinions about the level of freedom of expression and challenges to democratic development in Tunisia. There was broad consensus among guests that Tunisia was far behind the curve on democracy, but several gave credit to the Ben Ali government for delivering relative prosperity and upholding protections for women. Guests were very interested to hear about the Secretary's speech and particularly her mention of Tunisia among countries that need to do more on Internet freedom.

¶9. (SBU) Press coverage of the Secretary's speech was limited to a single article in the French-language daily Le Quotidien referencing the Secretary's criticism of China for hijacking the Google email accounts of human-rights advocates. The blogosphere took notice, however: links to videos of the speech were posted on several blogs, along with photos of the Embassy viewing event taken by a blogger who attended. Noting an empty chair next to a blogger in a photo, one poster asked humorously, "Is this empty chair 'Auntie Hillary's' seat?" Another noted, "Many others before [the blogger] went to the [American] Embassy but at the end we can only rely on Tunisians."

¶10. (SBU) Comment: While the government-controlled Tunisian media has not so far acknowledged Secretary Clinton's criticism of Tunisian Internet freedoms in her January 21 speech, it is clear that Tunisians are listening, and that their government's repression of free speech on the Internet has not gone unnoticed or unopposed by the Tunisian public. End comment.

